



HITECH GRAFFITI ALERT'S SEEM TO BE WORKING

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NEW GRAFFITI DETECTORS HELP POLICE CURB TAGGERS

By Karl Fischer Contra Costa Times

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"Mr. Pie" wants his backpack.

At least, Pinole police Officer Andrew Decker assumes so. "Mr. Pie" showed great care in decorating the backpack with his nickname before discarding it in a muddy trench beneath an overpass on San Pablo Avenue. "Mr. Pie" also left his skateboard, lying nearby amid empty spray paint cans.

"I think we might have interrupted somebody," Decker said.

He would know. Decker spends much of his work life searching out-of-the-way nooks for "Mr. Pie" and all his pals, who tag their nicknames as much as possible over every flat surface within reach of their permanent markers. They cost Pinole thousands in maintenance bills every year.

But a new gadget may help curb that problem, if Decker's early returns are any indication: The Merlin anti-graffiti sensor, which detects graffiti as the vandal applies it, and alerts the police.

Decker's pager buzzes whenever the hidden devices trip. They rarely misidentify lawful activity as vandalism in the monitored spots, he says, and only once failed to detect graffiti.

"Before the sensors went in, I was getting new cases every weekend," said Decker, who investigates all graffiti cases for his department. "Within four hours of installation, I got a hit. I was like, 'This can't be right."

It was. Officers nabbed a 14-year-old from Fairfield minutes later, clambering out from an overpass where Pinole Shores Drive crosses above rail lines. A dozen more arrests followed since April 2009, and now Decker's pager buzzes far less.

Reports of graffiti vandalism in Pinole dropped from 85 in 2008 to 48 in 2009, the year Pinole added the devices. So far this year, Decker worked only 10 cases.

Merlin did not solve Pinole's graffiti problem. While portable, the devices cover small areas, such as single walls popular with the spray-paint set. And Pinole only uses them to protect public property, though the technology is commercially available.

Decker, and officers with similar jobs in neighboring towns, still spend much of their time documenting and tracking "tagger crews" that frequent the region. Members aim to cast their signatures widely and conspicuously. They often practice on Pinole's numerous street overcrossings.

Cleaning up after them costs thousands of dollars. Caltrans spends about \$30,000 annually just removing graffiti from signs and sound walls along Contra Costa County's stretch of Interstate 80. But police must typically string together multiple cases to prove that an individual tagger caused enough damage to warrant a felony.

Departments along the same corridor devote resources to the problem. Neighboring San Pablo, for example, last year began using satellite mapping technology to track its graffiti. Richmond, another neighbor, spends thousands annually repainting or replacing elements of city hardscape. That city picked up a pair of the Merlin devices this month.

"My initial impression is favorable," said Robert Songey, regional maintenance manager for Caltrans's Delta district.

"The technology is still young, so I can't say it's definitely a solution. But it seems to be doing well."

Songey's office is the primary distributor of Merlins locally. Caltrans purchases and maintains the devices for local police departments in exchange for agreements to respond when they go off. Besides Pinole and Richmond, the

Contra Costa Sheriff's Office also expressed interest in working with Caltrans, particularly in El Sobrante and in the San Ramon Valley, Songey said.

- "The technology has been around for about a year and a half, and it's just beginning to get attention," said Michael Neeley, vice president of Broadband Discovery Systems, which invented the device. "Miami just bought some, and Fort Worth has them."
- Merlin activations have accounted for about 100 vandalism arrests so far, Neeley said. Neither he nor his clients would publicly discuss details of its operation or placement, as graffiti vandals are a notoriously resourceful group. But Neeley did say that Broadband invented the device while working on gunshot recognition technology similar to that used by ShotSpotter, a product already widely accepted by law enforcement.
- Decker's favorite graffiti spot, beneath San Pablo Avenue, features an improbable amount of paint as high as 20 feet off the ground. It's hard to explain why the elusive "Mr. Pie" would risk his neck, climbing up there, above the railroad tracks.

Officer Decker just wants him to stop.

"The sensors do provide a deterrent in the places where we have used them," Decker said. "It's not the whole answer, but it is helpful."